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Administration Debating Antiterrorist Measures

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WASHINGTON, June 5 — Three and a half years after announcing that combating terrorism would be President Reagan's first national-security priority, officials say a debate on the subject is still going on in the Administration and that it will be taken up at the economic summit conference this week.

The British are said to have drafted a tough statement designed to show that the seven leaders at the meeting that opens Thursday in London are determined to do something about state-sponsored terrorism. Another reason the statement was drafted, according to a key Administration official, is that "They think we're serious about pre-emptive military attacks against countries supporting terrorism and they want to try to head this off."

Two months ago, President Reagan signed a two-and-a-half-page decision memorandum that officials called a foundation for a policy but not specific guidelines for action or specific commitments of new resources.

As described by a range of Administration officials, the document approved on April 3 lists general principles — including efforts to "dissuade" countries from sponsoring terrorism and the right "to defend ourselves" if victimized. But there is no discussion of how to do this, and no definition of state-sponsored terrorism.

The Diplomatic Alternative

Nor did the document discuss diplomatic efforts to organize countries against state-sponsored terrorism, as was done a decade ago against hijackings, beyond calling for working "as closely as possible" with other nations. Officials said an obstacle to such efforts is the fact that many nations are reluctant to jeopardize economic ties with Iran, Syria, Libya and other nations, yet want to combat terrorism.

Instead, according to the officials, the President's memorandum raises a whole series of questions for further study — principally, what additional resources are needed to gather intelligence on terrorist activities and how the United States should respond to different kinds of terrorist attacks.

At the conference discussion on the subject, officials said the British are expected to take the lead. Officials described the French as hesitant about issuing a policy statement and the Italians as reluctant to get too deeply involved given their important trade relationship with Libya.

A senior official, commenting on some Administration-inspired news reports that there was now a new policy of taking pre-emptive and punitive action against terrorists, stated that the policy was essentially not new at all.

Cooperation With Other Nations

He said all it meant was that known terrorists would be arrested and that Washington should cooperate more with countries that have intelligence on terrorists, such as Britain, West Germany and Israel.

Officials said the memorandum also stressed doing everything "legally." This word was added to the final document, according to the sources, even after virtually all those involved in the interdepartmental study rejected a recommendation by senior Pentagon officials to authorize "hit squads" to kill terrorists and after the Central Intelligence Agency succeeded in removing any language that might be construed as involving it in domestic spying.

Robert C. McFarlane, the national security adviser; Vice Adm. John Poindexter, his deputy, and other senior White House officials were said by knowledgeable officials to have fashioned the language of the document so that Mr. Reagan could be portrayed as taking strong action without his being committed to anything, especially anything that the Democrats in an election year could portray as recklessness.

'Crossing the Line'

The result, in the view of some in the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency, is a document that means either "essentially doing better at what we've already been doing for several years now," as one said, "or crossing the line at some point with pre-emptive counterforce and military retaliation where hard evidence may be lacking."

The potential for just such actions in a second Reagan Administration is precisely what makes the document attractive to a number of high-ranking Pentagon civilians and several senior officials as well.

In a recent magazine interview, William J. Casey, Director of Central Intelligence, cited Israeli action in striking back at countries that aid terrorist attacks and continued, "I think you will see more of that — retaliation against facilities connected with the country sponsoring the terrorists or retaliation that just hurts the interests of countries which sponsor terrorism."

Issues of Conscience

A close associate of Secretary of State George P. Shultz said the Secretary was "grappling with his conscience." The source said Mr. Shultz was in favor of using force, but was against what he said was the Israeli model of retaliating against the innocent along with the guilty.

This official said Mr. Shultz's thinking and that of the Administration would evolve in response to specific provocations in the future. "Some terrorist action will spark an Administration reaction," the official said.

To many officials connected with this issue, the President's decision document represents at least a temporary halt to three years of bureaucratic drift and high-level inattention to a problem the Administration leaders initially called their highest priority.

Bombings in Lebanon

By all accounts, the twin shocks that energized senior officials were the bombings of the American Embassy and the marine compound in Lebanon. The latter was followed by a spate of alarming intelligence reports to the effect that terrorist groups — along with Iranian, Libyan and Syrian leaders — had come to the conclusion that terrorism was working, that it was the way to break American will.

Before a terrorist drove an explosive-laden truck into the Marine headquarters at Beirut's airport, killing 241 American servicemen, Congress and the American public were uneasy with the American presence in Lebanon. Afterward, as officials saw it, the political pressure to withdraw the marines became irresistible.

It was at this point that senior officials focussed on the interdepartmental studies that had been languishing for some time.

Achievements Listed

Since then, Administration officials maintained that three things have been accomplished: reorganization and new personnel that they hope will strengthen policy formulation and action; the reaching of an uneasy consensus about what is known and not known about the phenomenon of government-supported terrorism, and agreement on a series of small steps to improve coordination against terrorists within the United States and with other countries.

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